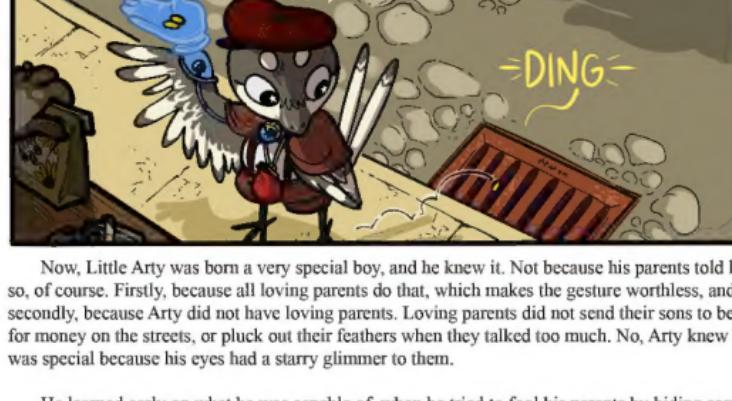


POPPY

CHAPTER 8: MISDIRECTION

At the age of ten, Arthur Chicadino lost a coin down a storm drain and started down a path that would consume millions.



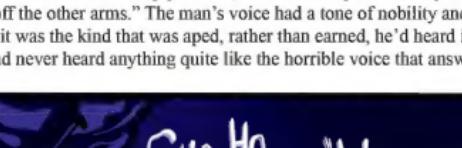
Now, Little Arty was born a very special boy, and he knew it. Not because his parents told him so, of course. Firstly, because all loving parents do that, which makes the gesture worthless, and secondly, because Arty did not have loving parents. Loving parents did not send their sons to beg for money on the streets, or pluck out their feathers when they talked too much. No, Arty knew he was special because his eyes had a starry glimmer to them.

He learned early on what he was capable of, when he tried to fool his parents by hiding some of his earned coin under his tongue. As he leaned over the sink outside, washing the metal taste from his mouth and the aching from his bruises, he realized he could still hear their radio in the house, crackling loudly. The money his parents took from him had absorbed his magic and become tiny ears for him to spy with. He experimented over the next few weeks to find the limit of his abilities, sucking on seeds and spitting them out near busy intersections, and discovered he could hear several streams of sound in the back of his head, parsing two, five, ten distant conversations at once, just as clearly as if they were right next to him. Young Arty marvelled at the complex world unfolding around him, and the possibilities of this magic raced through his mind.

First, I should destroy my parents, the boy thought. So he did. He infected their house keys and jotted down every incriminating thing he heard them say and do as he panhandled on the streets. Arty found that his father was constantly embezzling money from work for himself and blowing it all at the parlors, while his mother was having affairs behind his back with every able-bodied mammal on the block, and once he'd compiled several months worth of dirt, he left each of them anonymous missives revealing the other's behaviors where he knew they'd find them. From there, their paranoia and pettiness did all of the work for him, and within a week, their relationship, reputations, and mental states were in complete shambles as young Arty flew into the night, knowing he would manage just fine on his own.

Arty took up residence in the backstreets of charming Sorvail, spreading his bugs throughout the town and absorbing every scrap of information that passed his way. He'd drop 1-Crumb coins behind furniture in the local hangouts and make a killer profit selling info to tourists on the streets. Then he would loan out his pocket change to schoolchildren so he could eavesdrop on their lessons without spending a single day in the classroom. He made friends almost as easily as he made money, he believed; it was easy to get to know a person when you could spend a week listening to their life before you even said a word to them. As he easily obtained everything he'd wanted, Arty's ambitions began to wane without a greater goal to strive for, whether he realized it or not. With comfort had come complacency, and with complacency came normality, and for a while, it seemed Arty would have been satisfied with the cushy little life he had constructed for himself forever.

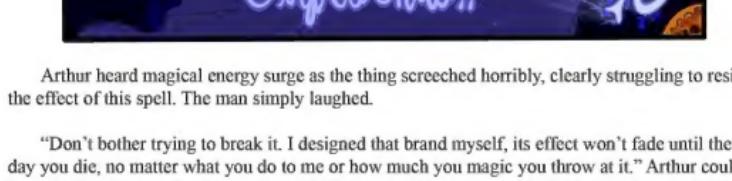
But then, of course, he dropped that coin into that storm drain.



It was such a little mistake. The Nibble had slipped out of his coinpurse while he was paying for a bag of birdseed. Arty seethed as he heard it bounce off the pipe walls. He'd intended to sneak that Nibble into a cafe he'd heard a local politician frequented, but as the coin made its way out into the silt of Sorvail's cave systems, he found the sound of the underground streams to be so soothing that he quickly forgot why he was mad. As years went by and Arty became Arthur, he couldn't bring himself to disrupt the connection, as the white noise had become a crucial element of his bedtime routine.

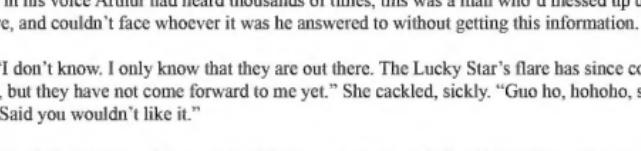
Then one night, some five years later, Arthur was suddenly awakened by strange noises in the caves. Crashes and yelling, and horrible monstrous shrieks filled the back of his head. Metal and magic clanged off of cramped underground walls for some tense minutes, and then finally, it all went still save for the sound of liquid dripping. Arthur was half-convinced he had been hallucinating until a deep voice broke the silence.

"Your 'precious babies' can't help you now, witch. Give up the identity of the Specter of Fate or I start taking off the other arms." The man's voice had a tone of nobility and righteousness to it, but Arthur knew it was the kind that was aped, rather than earned, he'd heard it so many times before. But he had never heard anything quite like the horrible voice that answered next.



The voice struggled to form words, out of both strain and spite. It darted back and forth between various pitches, lacking an identity of its own. Arthur thought he had learned every dialect there was from living in Sorvail, but this... thing was just alien to him.

"Don't test my patience," the man spat. "I'm not giving you a choice."



Arthur heard magical energy surge as the thing screeched horribly, clearly struggling to resist the effect of this spell. The man simply laughed.

"Don't bother trying to break it. I designed that brand myself, its effect won't fade until the day you die, no matter what you do to me or how much you magic you throw at it." Arthur could hear sizzling flesh under the man's words. He was utterly engrossed in the horror show unfolding deep in those caves away from prying eyes. "Now then, tell me what I want to know."

"Fine. I'll. Tell you. You won't. like it," she relented. "The Specter of Fate is. Dead. Always was. That is what makes it a specter. Ob. Vi. Ous. Ly. But its memories live on within the stars. Its desire to consume knowledge is born again and again through new flesh, bolstered by the blood of gods."

"Skip the dramatics! Just tell me who the newest one is!" the man yelled. There was a desperation in his voice Arthur had heard thousands of times, this was a man who'd messed up dearly before, and couldn't face whoever it was he answered to without getting this information.

"I don't know. I only know that they are out there. The Lucky Star's flare has since come and gone, but they have not come forward to me yet." She cackled, sickly. "Guo ho, hohoho, see, I told you. Said you wouldn't like it."

"Ugh! Useless bag of dragon blood!" the man cried out. Arthur listened intently as the man fumed and kicked for a few seconds, but then jumped as new sounds of panic filled the space. The man suddenly went deathly silent, making way for the noise of muted choking.

"Guo ho... No no no. Not useless. I am Poda, Hand of the Specter of Fate. I am exactly as useful as a limb need be, even severed from the brain, just as that tentacle currently tightening around your neck was." Malice was dripping from her words as the sound of metal spikes hitting the floor reverberated around the chamber. "No one can stop Fate. Not the old woman, not her little Veil, and certainly not **you**." There was a sickening, meaty noise as the choking was cut short. Arthur had some guesses as to how she finished the man off, and none of them were pleasant.

And then, all that could be heard on the channel was the flow of water once more. Arthur wandered to his bedroom window, still processing what he'd just witnessed. He almost couldn't believe it. Monsters and magical conspiracies waiting to snap down on anyone who poked their beak too close to the truth. A chill ran up his spine, the witch's words running through his mind.

Cheee heee! How thrilling! he thought.



Some forty-eight years later, Harley Fern was twisting her legs up in blankets and searching for patterns in the popcorn texture of her apartment ceiling to distract herself from the ball of stress expanding in her stomach. The adrenaline that carried her home after talking to the opossum ambassador had melted away the instant her hand gripped the front door knob, and she was left with only a cold sweat to keep her company in the lonely apartment where her husband once would. Harley had nursed the delusion that Chicadino could be deceived for just long enough for her to take a chance on that letter, and now she could do nothing but wait for an inevitable rapping at her door, accompanied by a small box containing two delicate, misplaced opossum ears.

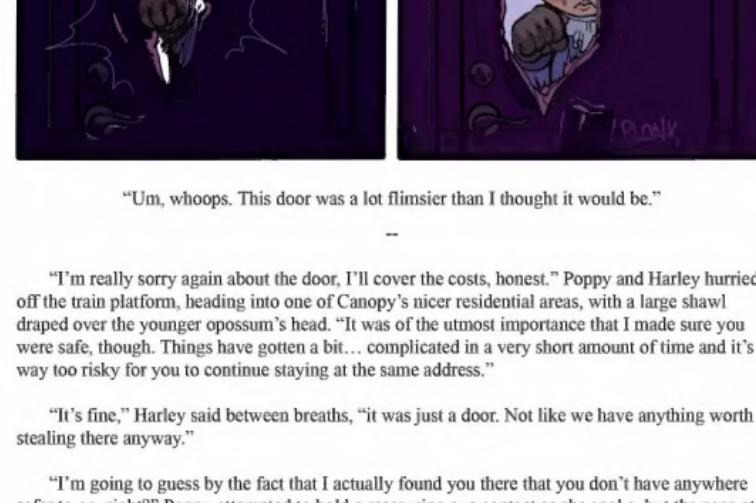
As if on cue, Harley heard loud footsteps plodding up the stairwell outside, and bolted up reflexively. The building was so old and run-down that she could feel every thump through the floor, and she could tell they were coming down the hall of her landing. Harley held her breath as the clomps came nearer and nearer, as if doing so would convince their owner to keep on walking by, but even as it became clear that they wouldn't be going any further than her door, she found herself still unable to breathe. She stiffened and braced herself for what seemed like much longer than the seconds that passed.



Harley felt her body fill with sand, prickling at the inside of her skin and weighing her down. As she struggled to balance herself on mushy elbows, the tiny room stretched before her eyes, turning two meters into twenty. She wrapped her pillow around her head, trying to muffle out the noise, hoping it would all go away.



There was a yelling accompanying the bangs at the door now, but Harley couldn't make out the words or recognize the voice, nor did she want to. *Just go away*, she thought. *Leave your warning and let me suffer in peace*. The door simply continued shaking on its hinges in response.



"Um, whoops. This door was a lot flimsier than I thought it would be."

"I'm really sorry again about the door, I'll cover the costs, honest." Poppy and Harley hurried off the train platform, heading into one of Canopy's nicer residential areas, with a large shawl draped over the younger opossum's head. "It was of the utmost importance that I made sure you were safe, though. Things have gotten a bit... complicated in a very short amount of time and it's way too risky for you to continue staying at the same address."

"It's fine," Harley said between breaths, "it was just a door. Not like we have anything worth stealing there anyway."

"I'm going to guess by the fact that I actually found you there that you don't have anywhere safer to go, right?" Poppy attempted to hold a reassuring eye contact as she spoke, but the pace at which they were walking made it impractical, and she yielded after bumping her shoulder into the third street lamp in a row. "Don't you have any other opossum friends who can support you?"

"This is our problem. I'm not going to drag another possum into it."

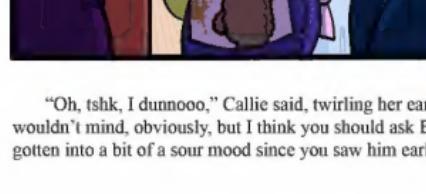
"Besides me, you mean," Poppy laughed. But she realized she had done so in error as Harley tensed up, her gait beginning to drag. She wasn't used to hearing jokes without some biting under-tone at her expense.

"Ah oh no, you're right—" her voice cracked. "I've involved you too." Poppy performed an about-face and put her hands up to catch Harley's shoulders, gripping them gently.

"No, none of that," Poppy whispered. "I already told you, you are not alone. Anyway, it's my job to be involved in this sort of thing. Otherwise, what's the point of me?" She gave Harley her dopiest grin, which seemed to calm the poor girl down.

"Yes..." she sniffed, just once. "Yes, thank you, Ms. O'Possum." Harley looked around at the tidy houses and fancy condominiums running down the street, and finally thought to ask the most pressing question. "Where... exactly are we going?"

"Hopefully the only stop you'll need to make." The two opossums walked up a path leading to a keen-looking two-story home, and Harley instinctively broke into a sweat, fully recognizing how out of place she must have seemed in this part of the city. Poppy went to knock on the front door, but quickly decided to instead check for the doorbell. Just in case.



"Whoa, Ms. Possum, back already?" The smell of meat poured out from the entry hall as one of Boris' girlfriends answered the door. Poppy personally found the whole arrangement to be kind of fishy, but she figured anyone who knew how to make a five-way relationship work without constant bickering and lies could do whatever they wanted. "You have good timing, I thought I'd try making some stew since we were going to have an extra spot at the table this weekend."

The little one's taking a nap right now, but I can ask Val to wake her up if you want to stick around for dinner!"

"Oh no," Poppy waved her hand, "don't bother Lily, I have to head out again anyway. There was just someone I needed to bring by." She gestured to Harley. "Callie, this is Mrs. Fern, she needs a safe place to stay for the next couple of days and I was wondering if you guys could host her."

"Oh, tshk, I dunnooo," Callie said, twirling her ear and avoiding eye contact. "I mean, I wouldn't mind, obviously, but I think you should ask Bor-bor about that. I have to warn you, he's gotten into a bit of a sour mood since you saw him earlier."



Poppy could already hear the familiar sounds of *Funzie Frogo* playing from down the hall, and she was completely unsurprised to find Boris watching an episode she knew he'd already seen a dozen times. It was the one where Frogo's friend Sir Hambo fights 'This big guy, like, the biggest guy, with a bad glove,' as Lily had once described it to her.



"Hey there, Bor-bor," she teased.

"Well, that was fast," Boris mumbled, not even turning to look. "Did you clear things up with the bounty office?"

"No, no, I had another thing to take care of, I won't be long. I don't have a bounty on my head anyway." Poppy coughed. "For once." In the years since she'd fled Trance, Poppy had grown accustomed to breaking the hands of cocky upstarts with shiny new licenses trying to take her in for what they thought would be easy opossum bounty money. She always knew it was time to pack up the house and move whenever a seasoned vet came sniffing around, but she put some many green-horns in traction that she'd earned an unflattering nickname in every hunting community on the Bourbon coast. Really, it was refreshing for a threat on her life to be illegal for a change.

"So what was that about a hit, then?" Boris said, finishing his drink. He didn't seem to be too concerned for her safety, probably because he knew firsthand how durable she was.

"It's... complicated and inconvenient to talk about. You know, work stuff." Poppy chose her words carefully, wanting to stay off the topic of Kit and the Prime Minister as much as possible. "What have you been so grumpy about?"

"Oh, nothing important," he said in the tone of a man who obviously considered the matter to be extremely important. "I just caught the *Seven Skies* premiere and I guess I'm pretty bummed about it."

"*Seven-* Oh, that cartoon with the pirates. I thought you'd be glad they brought it back."

"Yeah, they brought it back," he sulked. "As a miniseries with a new writing team! It's not fair, Captain Clatterjaw finally revealed himself at the end of the original series, but they're treating him like some cheesy kid's villain instead of the criminal powerhouse he was built up to be!" It was clear this was stressing him out quite a lot, as his body mass had been slowly deflating the more worked up he got. Poppy almost admired that Boris could afford to get so worked up over something so quaint in the face of what she was dealing with.

"Look. Boris." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "We're ALL dealing with jarring changes right now. Sure, it's a big pain, but sometimes you have to make a compromise if you want something important to you to continue. And hey, there's some advantages. If it wasn't for format changes, this entire scene would've been cut for time, and you'd have only shown up for one panel as a plot device."

"...Poppy, why are you here?"

"I need to ask a really big favor. See, my friend Harley is in a really bad spot right now. I don't think it's safe for her to stay at home by herself for the next few days, so I was thinking..."

"You were thinking she should stay in one of our guest rooms," he interrupted, continuing to stare at the screen ahead of him.

"Yes! Exactly! Would that be okay with you?"

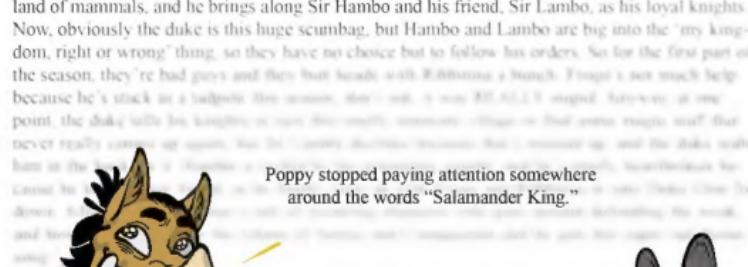
"That depends," Boris turned down the volume slightly. "What kind of trouble are we talking about?"

"Er..." Poppy looked to Harley, who could offer nothing besides an anxious shrug and shake of the head as she backed herself as far into the corner as possible.

"This wouldn't happen to be related to whatever dangerous 'work stuff' you're going through now, would it?" he finally turned toward her, his brows furrowing in concern. "Because if this is a witness protection thing, you should be taking that to the cops." Poppy winced at the suggestion.

"Boris." She paused, trying to phrase her statement delicately. "I understand that you're... used to living with a certain sense of security. But you have to understand, the police are not here to protect opossums just because new laws say they have to. They've already failed this girl once, and I can't trust them with something like this. Please, you don't have to do anything crazy for me, but I need someone to make sure she's in a safe place. Just for three days, tops."

"Poppy, come on..." Boris put a hoof to his temple. "You know I don't mind looking after Lily any time I'm free, but this is some heavy stuff you're dropping in my lap. If this is such a big deal that the cops can't take care of it, then I'm not sure I can handle that. Plus, I got people I care about here, I can't just put them in harm's way." Poppy knew she was losing him more and more as his confidence dwindled. He had always been reliable, but he was only as strong as his ego, and she needed Boris Glorius to be mighty enough to deter any goon who was stupid enough to even think about assaulting the toughest, most high-profile fighter in the city. She needed a different tactic, something that would appeal to Boris' prouder side. Something like...



"Hey, sorry to change gears all of a sudden, but who's that cool pig guy?" Poppy asked, feigning ignorance.

"That cool pig guy?" Boris' face lit up, and Poppy could already see his chest puffing out, sensing an opportunity to gush. "What, are you for real? That's Sir Hambo! He's like, the only good thing that came out of Season 3 of *FunFro!*"

"Hm, really? What's so great about him?" she egged on.

"Oh man, 'what's so great', she asks. Where to even start with this? Okay, so in Season 3, since Frogo's dad sealed away the Salamander King, a bunch of new bad dudes from other nations start showing up in Phibeos to throw their weight around. One of them is Duke Glut-Ton from the land of mammals, and he brings along Sir Hambo and his friend, Sir Lambo, as his loyal knights. Now, obviously the duke is this huge scumbag, but Hambo and Lambo are big into the 'my kingdom, right or wrong' thing, so they have no choice but to follow his orders. So for the first part of the season, they're bad guys and they butt heads with R.B.Buzzo & Stunz. Tropo's not much help because he's stuck in a hedgehog-like monster that only has one eye. But then, at one point, the duke tells the two of them that they're not allowed to fight the Salamander King, and they never really care for our nation's safety, so they decide to just leave the country. This makes the duke really angry, so he sends his men to chase them down. A bunch of them get captured, and then...

Poppy stopped paying attention somewhere around the words "Salamander King."

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After six uninterrupted minutes of summarizing episodes and pointing out recurring themes, Boris finally started winding down, having grown several inches during his speech.

"So basically, Hambo's character arc is about learning to dedicate his strength to those who can't defend themselves, rather than those who already possess power, but simply don't want to put their own lives on the line. He's not very complex, but his earnest, unflinching nature makes him really easy to root for in extreme situations." Boris scratched at his chin, looking rather self-satisfied with his in-depth analysis. Poppy knew it was the perfect time to strike, and looked away slightly, batting her eyes for effect.

"A brave, selfless knight who always stands up for the weak, huh?" she pondered in the most admiring tone she could put on. "I sure wish he was around for us right now."

"Yeah, he'd be able to hel—" He stopped suddenly, his eyes narrowing in realization. "Waaaiiiit. Wait, hold on, yeah, I see what you're doing here."

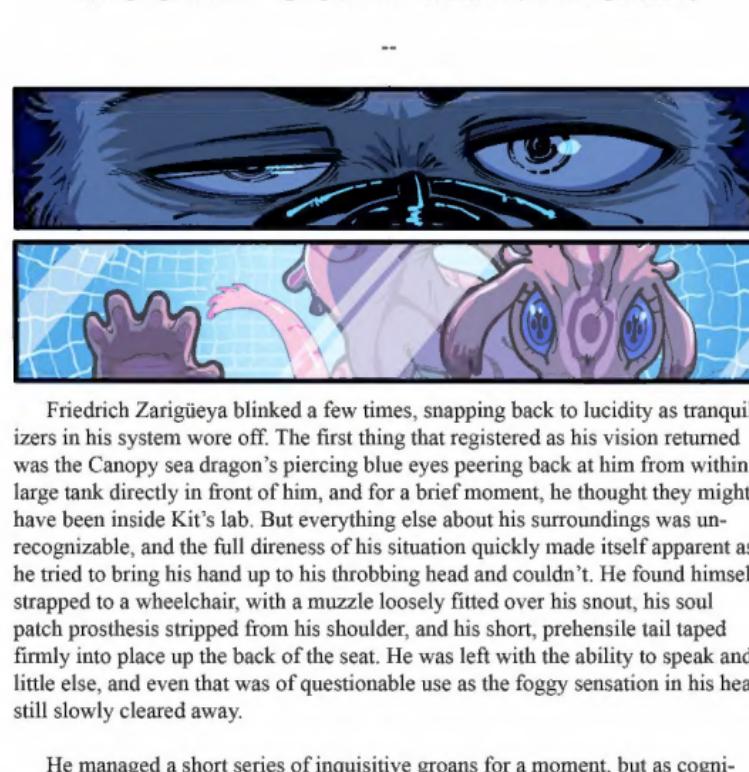
"Oh?" Poppy said, making no effort to mask her intentions.

"You're trying to implicitly compare me to one of my personal heroes so I'll feel obligated to protect your friend in some attempt to live up to his example, aren't you?" Boris' body was steaming slightly as it grew now, his confidence returning to him.

"Is **that** what I'm doing?" She was actively goading him now.



"Yeah? YEAH!? You think it's that easy to play me, O'Possum? Like I'm just gonna drop everything else to emulate a cool cartoon character?! Well, girly, lemme tell you somethin' right now!"

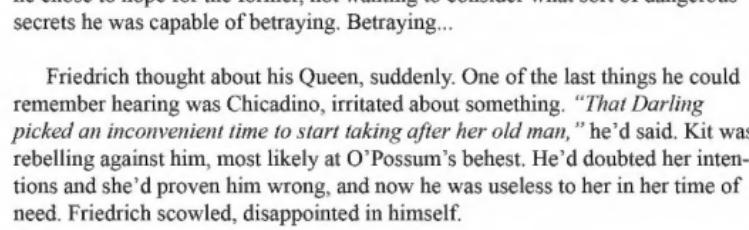


"YOU'RE GOD DAMN RIGHT."

Friedrich Zarigüeya blinked a few times, snapping back to lucidity as tranquilizers in his system wore off. The first thing that registered as his vision returned was the Canopy sea dragon's piercing blue eyes peering back at him from within a large tank directly in front of him, and for a brief moment, he thought they might have been inside Kit's lab. But everything else about his surroundings was unrecognizable, and the full direness of his situation quickly made itself apparent as he tried to bring his hand up to his throbbing head and couldn't. He found himself strapped to a wheelchair, with a muzzle loosely fitted over his snout, his soul patch prosthesis stripped from his shoulder, and his short, prehensile tail taped firmly into place up the back of the seat. He was left with the ability to speak and little else, and even that was of questionable use as the foggy sensation in his head still slowly cleared away.

He managed a short series of inquisitive groans for a moment, but as cognizance returned to him, silenced himself again, realizing he needed to gather as much information about his surroundings as possible without alerting his captors. He could turn his head slightly, but the wheelchair's wheels were locked, denying him the ability to rotate and look behind himself. It hardly mattered, anyway, the only useful source of light in the room were the tank lamps, casting a soft blue glow over him. There were tiny specks of lights dotting the walls beside the tank, marking various switches and inactive screens, none of them of any use to him. Above the tank was an alcove for handlers to dump in food, with a stairway leading up from the ground floor.

I was right, Friedrich thought, noticing a series of small holographic cameras lined up along the glass pane of the tank, itself a perfect replica of the one back at the lab. They were using the dragon to hide the contents of the real tank after all, and as it locked eyes with him, he realized its odd behavior must have been the result of it watching and reacting to the people moving around in this room. It occurred to him, having spent weeks observing the lab in secret, that this plan required a staggering amount of foresight and effort, constructing an identical tank, setting up cameras, and syncing up the feeding times in this location with Kit's activity within the lab, all just to throw off the trail if someone somehow managed to sneak a spy camera into the lab as he had. He didn't know what was more unbelievable: that Chicadino was so paranoid that he would think to do all of this in advance, or that he himself was so paranoid that he managed to spot the one, single tiny flaw that went unaccounted for.



He could take no satisfaction in having his theory validated, however, after having been ambushed and taken prisoner so casually. Friedrich couldn't determine exactly how much time they had knocked him out for, but judging by the dull pain running along his back, it couldn't have been more than a few hours since Valente had trapped him under his burning talons. He couldn't recall the moment of being drugged, however, and could not know whether he'd been unconscious the whole time, or even continuously.

Had he already been "gleaned and cleaned," as Chicadino had put it? By the sound of it, Friedrich theorized it was some process of magical interrogation and memory alteration, although it seemed unlikely that they would begin wiping a portion of his memory and not cover their tracks fully. Either they hadn't yet started, or they simply couldn't risk him knowing what information they wanted for even a moment more than necessary. In a rare glimmer of optimism for him,

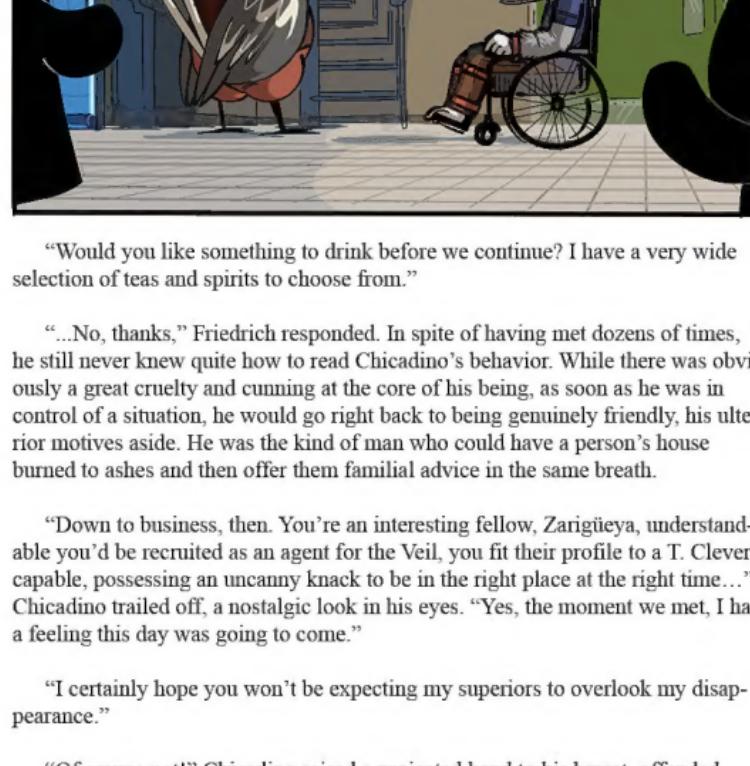
he chose to hope for the former, not wanting to consider what sort of dangerous secrets he was capable of betraying. Betraying...

Friedrich thought about his Queen, suddenly. One of the last things he could remember hearing was Chicadino, irritated about something. "*That Darling picked an inconvenient time to start taking after her old man,*" he'd said. Kit was rebelling against him, most likely at O'Possum's behest. He'd doubted her intentions and she'd proven him wrong, and now he was useless to her in her time of need. Friedrich scowled, disappointed in himself.

"I have no right to call myself a Knight," he admitted quietly to no one but a lobotomized dragon and the darkness around him, his only remaining peers.

"You shouldn't beat yourself up so much, Zarigüeya," a genial voice said over an intercom. "You did an excellent job serving the queen, for a man who only considered it a cover." Friedrich heard the heavy *ka-chunk* of a door to his left unlock, and winced as light broke through the darkness. He turned back toward it, clutching his eyes as they adjusted, and caught sight of three figures entering, Chicadino hopping cheerfully in front. The bird clicked his tongue in disappointment. "Oh, look at this. They just left you in here with the lights off? Could have at least pointed you away from the tank if they wanted you to be able to sleep properly."

"Mr. Prime Minister," Friedrich greeted him, as the lights flickered on. Two odd-looking cats stood off to the side, but for now, his attention was focused solely on their boss.



"Would you like something to drink before we continue? I have a very wide selection of teas and spirits to choose from."

"...No, thanks," Friedrich responded. In spite of having met dozens of times, he still never knew quite how to read Chicadino's behavior. While there was obviously a great cruelty and cunning at the core of his being, as soon as he was in control of a situation, he would go right back to being genuinely friendly, his ulterior motives aside. He was the kind of man who could have a person's house burned to ashes and then offer them familial advice in the same breath.

"Down to business, then. You're an interesting fellow, Zarigüeya, understandable you'd be recruited as an agent for the Veil, you fit their profile to a T. Clever, capable, possessing an uncanny knack to be in the right place at the right time..." Chicadino trailed off, a nostalgic look in his eyes. "Yes, the moment we met, I had a feeling this day was going to come."

"I certainly hope you won't be expecting my superiors to overlook my disappearance."

"Of course not!" Chicadino raised a projected hand to his breast, offended. "You didn't think I was planning on **killing** you, did you? Oh, Zarigüeya, please, you're not the first Veil agent I've had strapped to a chair. Besides, I certainly wouldn't want to upset your dear wife. No, I can get everything I need from you without harming a single hair on that handsome head, and then you'll go off on your merry way, like nothing happened."

"*Hrem,*" a deep voice coughed from the sideline.

"Oh, yes, not that I'll be the one picking apart that brain of yours," Chicadino laughed. "Pardon me, allow me to introduce you to my specialists for this sort of thing, *The Twins*." He gestured to the creepy black and white cats who had followed him into the room.



"This charming gentleman is *Kuroscuro*."

"Nice to meet ya'," said the man in black, fiddling with a set of keys that Friedrich recognized, but couldn't quite place.

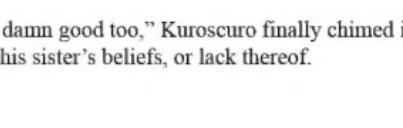
"And this is his enchanting sister, *Chiaroshiro*. She's who you'll be spending most of your time here with."

"It is a pleasure," the woman in white whispered, her voice as soft as her smile. Friedrich wasn't buying it for a second, he'd seen the same smile once before clinging to the face of a comrade from his service days. It was the mask of a sadist trying to ape compassion without ever having known it.

"And with that out of the way, you must excuse me. I'm expecting a phone call." Chicadino skipped back to the doorway, before pausing a moment and turning back. "Don't forget, you two! Not a scratch on him, or I'll gut you myself!" And then he winked and disappeared behind swinging doors.

"You know," Friedrich started, as they wheeled him down the hallway into a side room. There was an open drain in the middle of the floor, and the space absolutely reeked of industrial cleaner. This was not a room where good things happened. "As much as I appreciate the atmosphere, it does rather kill the tension when I know you're not allowed to hurt me from the start." The Twins only turned to one another and shared a little laugh. He almost thought it sounded like pity, had he believed they were the sort of people capable of it.

"Oh, Mr. War Hero," Chiaroshiro came in close to him, way too close for comfort. She pulled his head tight to her chest and cooed in his ears. "You have *no idea* the sensations I can create for you."



Friedrich tore himself away from her with the small amount of articulation his torso was allowed in the chair, as Kuroscuro wheeled over a small table covered in a thick sheet.

"Before we begin, I'm going to let you in on a little secret," she whispered. "That's only fair, after all, it's boring if you're the only one doing the talking. Would you like to hear my philosophy?"

"*Not tea,*" The world you and I live in isn't real," she continued. "Everything you see, and hear, and touch, and believe in your precious little heart is all in your head, just a big illusion. Nothing you say, or do, or think can prove your own existence." Friedrich suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yes, yes, and I'm going to guess that you're the only real person, and we're all just figments of your imagination for you to toy with? That's fairly common sociopath mentality."

"I'm **not** real," she spat back, her warm smile enduring. "Weren't you listening? This world doesn't exist, thus, I don't exist. What's that phrase? *I think, therefore I am?* That's already too great an assumption. I don't know that I'm thinking. I **think** that I'm thinking." Friedrich could tell that pointing out the obvious contradiction would only be encouraging her delusions further.

"Alright," he humored her. "Let's agree you're not real and nothing matters. Why bother with any of this to begin with? Why take these orders, or try to further a lifestyle you don't even think exists? Why not just kill yourself and save us some trouble?"

"Because," she replied, finally discarding her smile for a moment, leaving her expression dead blank. "A puppet that can see her own strings will continue dancing to them regardless."

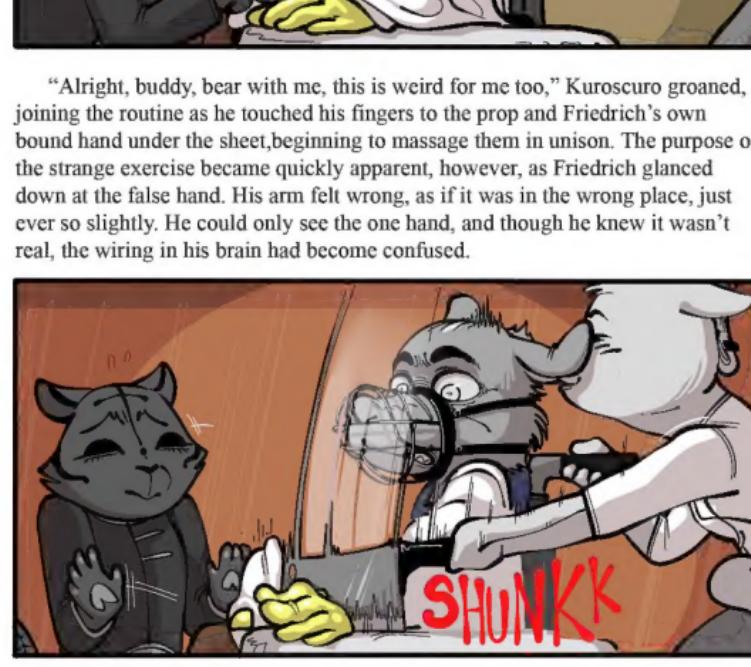
"The money's damn good too," Kuroscuro finally chimed in. He clearly did not seem to share his sister's beliefs, or lack thereof.

"Mr. War Hero," Chiaroshiro looped a finger around Friedrich's muzzle and tugged down, demanding his attention once more. "Have you ever heard of something called the *body transfer* illusion?"

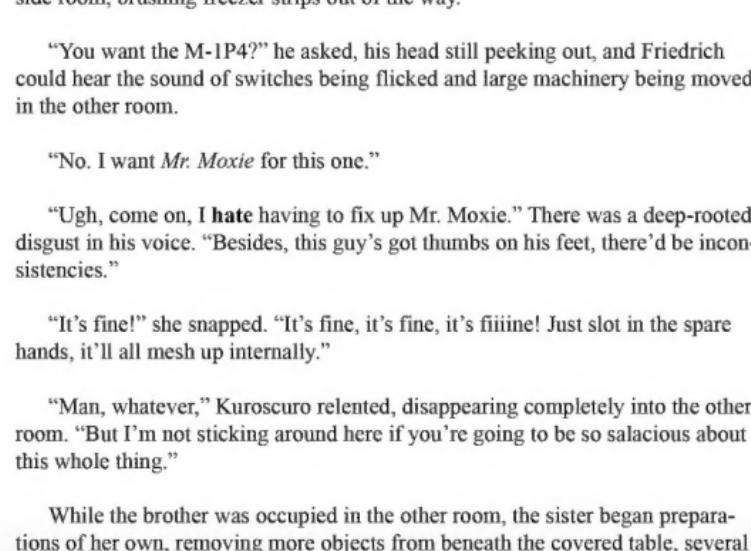
"Not as an illusion, no."



"Allow me to give you a demonstration, then." Chiaroshiro pulled an object out from under the cloth, a floppy rubber hand, about the size of his own, and waved it in his face. "Look! A brand new hand, just for you. Oh, wait, what's this? Oops! This is a left hand! You've already got one of those!" Friedrich was already beginning to miss the previous conversation in the face of these obnoxious theatrics. She placed the hand on the table, exactly next to his, and then draped the sheet over his arm, leaving only the rubber hand exposed from the wrist up.



"Alright, buddy, bear with me, this is weird for me too," Kuroscuro groaned, joining the routine as he touched his fingers to the prop and Friedrich's own bound hand under the sheet, beginning to massage them in unison. The purpose of the strange exercise became quickly apparent, however, as Friedrich glanced down at the false hand. His arm felt wrong, as if it was in the wrong place, just ever so slightly. He could only see the one hand, and though he knew it wasn't real, the wiring in his brain had become confused.



Friedrich felt the cleaver slice through flesh for a split second, as real as the sensation had ever been. Red hot memories surged in him until the fake hand went numb and lifeless once more as his perception of reality reasserted itself. He stared straight ahead and held his composure as firmly as he could, but Chiaroshiro wasn't fooled, soaking in his distress as she scanned his face lovingly.

"Tell me, Mr. War Hero. Was that real, or fake?"

"It was... real irritating, if such was your intention," Friedrich seethed. For someone who claimed to have no thoughts, this woman was enjoying herself entirely too much for his liking.

"Kuro, we should begin." She nodded to her brother, who walked over to a side room, brushing freezer strips out of the way.

"You want the M-1P4?" he asked, his head still peeking out, and Friedrich could hear the sound of switches being flicked and large machinery being moved in the other room.

"No. I want *Mr. Moxie* for this one."

"Ugh, come on, I hate having to fix up Mr. Moxie." There was a deep-rooted disgust in his voice. "Besides, this guy's got thumbs on his feet, there'd be inconsistencies."

"It's fine!" she snapped. "It's fine, it's fine, it's fiiine! Just slot in the spare hands, it'll all mesh up internally."

"Man, whatever," Kuroscuro relented, disappearing completely into the other room. "But I'm not sticking around here if you're going to be so salacious about this whole thing."

While the brother was occupied in the other room, the sister began preparations of her own, removing more objects from beneath the covered table, several of which had been docked to a complicated device nestled in the bottom tray. She maneuvered behind him, and Friedrich felt a strap stretch across the back of his head and a heavy black blindfold dropped over his eyes, sending the world dark.

"There goes seeing," said Chiaroshiro. "Now for hearing." Friedrich attempted to swivel his ears in rebellion as she ran her fingers up toward them, but she simply gripped them together in one hand and stuffed a pair of soft objects into them with the other, blotting out his surroundings completely. Friedrich could hear only his own breathing through his head and the gurgling and shifting of his organs vibrating throughout his body. He was left in a void, but he was not alone, feeling the world around him shift as the wheelchair moved and tilted backward. There was no clear aim to this movement, he could tell that his captor was simply dancing him around the cramped room to satisfy her own amusement.

Then she stopped, temporarily leaving him without any point of reference, before rudely returning with a sharp pain to the back of his neck as another unit was being applied. The first thing Friedrich noticed was that his entire body suddenly felt extremely itchy, with a sensation of coarse material rubbing his skin in waves radiating out from his neck, before subsiding into a mild discomfort. The second thing he noticed, the thing that made his stomach churn, was that he could feel his right arm. Not in the usual way, the disjointed aching of a phantom limb, but as a physical, persisting object, hanging down over the side of his chair.

"Hee hee hee, it's disorienting, isn't it?" Chiaroshiro's voice teased from directly beside him, confirming the hands over his face belonged to her. "The tech involved is similar to the way a soul patch links up to your nervous system, but instead of a free-form projection, it's a closed link, and instead of manifesting your souls through magic, it... well, it sends them somewhere else."

Oh no, he thought.

"And what a place to be sent! I know the suspense must be killing you."

Please, no. Not like this.

"With a pliable synthetic skeleton, Ultra HD dual cameras and microphones, a highly accurate lagomatrone reproduction of the nervous system, and real working clocks—" The hands slipped away from Friedrich's eyes, to reveal that they were not his eyes at all.

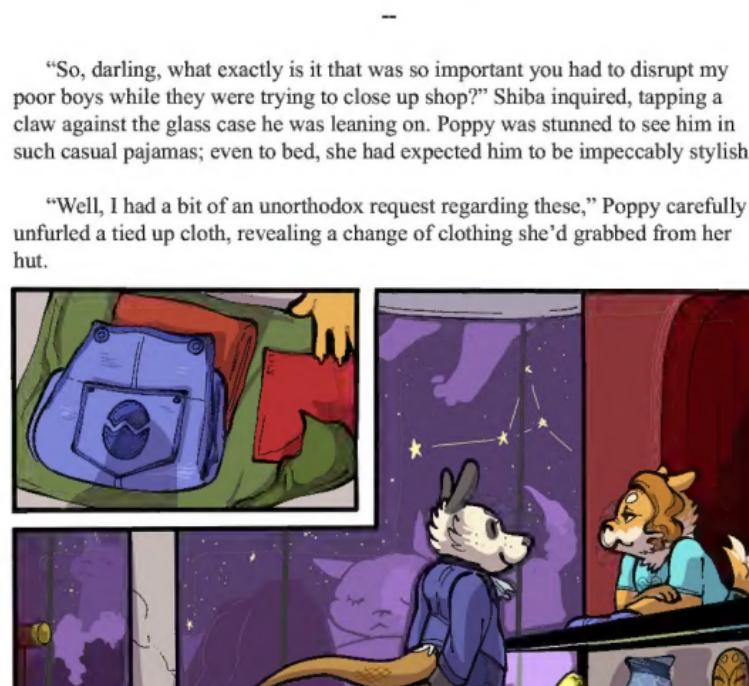
"Say helooooo to *Mr. Moxie~!*"

Friedrich tried to struggle, but the man behind him just shook his head and roared impotently, his body paralyzed. His sense of touch was almost completely desynced, nothing was right anymore. Friedrich couldn't feel the straps on his arm and legs, or his shoulders shake as he moved, or the heart beating in his chest. He only felt a deathly stillness as Mr. Moxie looked back at him in the mirror. The camera eyes on the doll swiveled in its head as Friedrich looked around in desperation, but nothing else moved at his will. Nothing on his new body was designed for locomotion, the bones were too unstable and the musculature was just there to fill space. This was a body designed to do one thing: Feel pain.

"I have nothing to say to you," Friedrich snarled, more feebly than he said it in his head, but Chiaroshiro didn't even acknowledge him.

"Mm, time for Mr. Zarigüeya to go away for a little while, Mr. Moxie," Chiaroshiro chirped, squeezing the doll's shoulders like a mother to her child. "We don't need him just yet, he's not trustworthy enough." She grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and turned the view away from the mirror, pointing Mr. Moxie toward a nondescript wall. Friedrich was now left almost entirely stranded, the frustrated growling from across the room serving as the only point of reference to his origin. Then, she gently and deliberately lifted his dangling arm.

For the first time in twenty years, Friedrich felt his right elbow sag over an armrest at his side. For the first time in twenty years, Friedrich's right hand's fingers intertwined with someone else's. For the first time in twenty years, Friedrich felt bones in his right arm crumple within flesh.



What's that sound filling the room? He thought.

Oh. It's my screaming.

"So, darling, what exactly is it that was so important you had to disrupt my poor boys while they were trying to close up shop?" Shiba inquired, tapping a claw against the glass case he was leaning on. Poppy was stunned to see him in such casual pajamas; even to bed, she had expected him to be impeccably stylish.

"Well, I had a bit of an unorthodox request regarding these," Poppy carefully unfurled a tied up cloth, revealing a change of clothing she'd grabbed from her hut.



"You still have these rags?" Shiba sneered, poking a finger through one of several frayed spots in the denim overalls. "Best use for these would be decorating the inside of a furnace, if you asked me."

"Please, Ms. Shiba, just hear me out for a second."

"First of all, Ms. Shiba's bedtime was at least a half-hour ago. You're dealing with Howard right now," he corrected. "Second, sweetheart, you know I'm just teasing. If you could make this quick, though?"

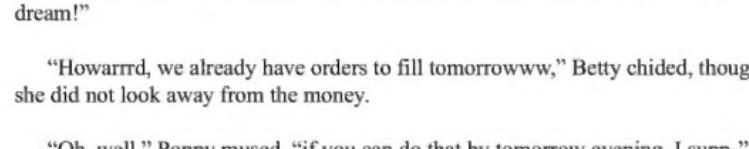
"I want these clothes cleaned, thoroughly." There was a pause that lasted a second too long for comfort.

"...You want me to do your laundry?" Shiba asked.

"No, no," Poppy scratched her head. "I mean, I want every trace of magic wiped from these. Down to every single stitch. I'm in... a weird situation and I'm not taking any chances."

"You're right," he nodded. "That is an unorthodox request. Charming and discharming fabric is really more Betty's expertise, and she can be awfully picky."

On cue, there was a crash from the bedroom as Mrs. Shiba rocketed over to investigate the sound of her own name. She hopped atop the counter and skittered over on all fours, coming to a stop and sliding her back legs forward into a kneeling position in a single graceful motion.



"Isn't it a bit late for dinner anyway?" Poppy laughed. "It's not good to go to bed right after eating."

"Hm! I'm not constrained by your pedestrian habits. The night is my muse now! Genius like mine can't be!"

"She's an idiot who took a five-hour nap a week ago and threw her entire sleep schedule out of sync," Howard interrupted. "Ms. O'Possum wants you to discharm her clothes, dear."

"...You want me to do her laundry?!" Betty shrieked. "No, no no, I'm much too busy to waste my time on something that."

"I have money," Poppy noted.

"But what is time but an illusion, anyway?" Betty reconsidered. "How much money are we talking?"

"Uhhhh..." Poppy dug around her jacket, pulling out a bundled wad of notes and tossing it to Howard. "This much?"

"This is like two hundred thousand nibbles," he marvelled, skimming the bills. Betty simply sat frozen, mouth agape.

"Is it?" Poppy asked. "I don't spend a lot of money, so I sort of lost track of what I've been making. So how quickly could you get it cleaned?"

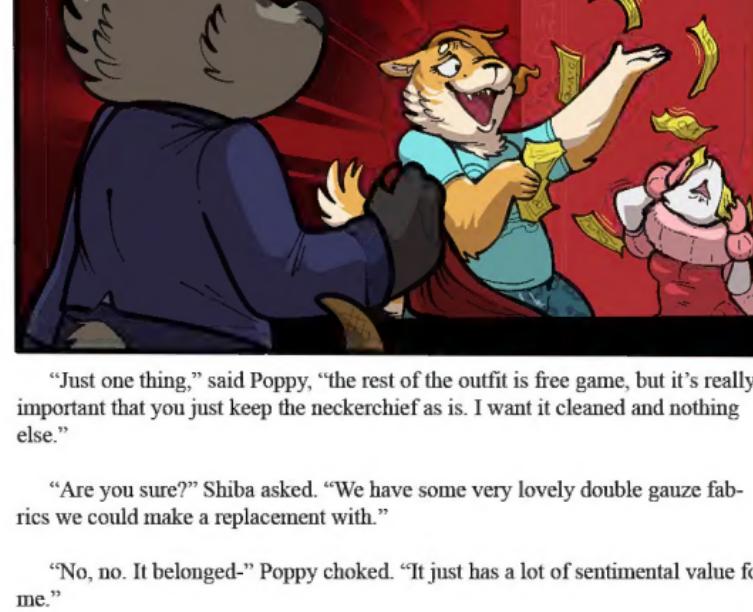
"Poppy, for **two hundred thousand nibbles**, my pride as a couturier would allow me no less than to remake these rags from scratch, clean as a newborn's dream!"

"Howarrd, we already have orders to fill tomorrowww," Betty chided, though she did not look away from the money.

"Oh, well," Poppy mused, "if you can do that by tomorrow evening, I supp--"

"WE COULD DO IT BY DAWN."

"HOWARD, WE CAAAAN'T" Betty insisted, rubbing bills over her face.



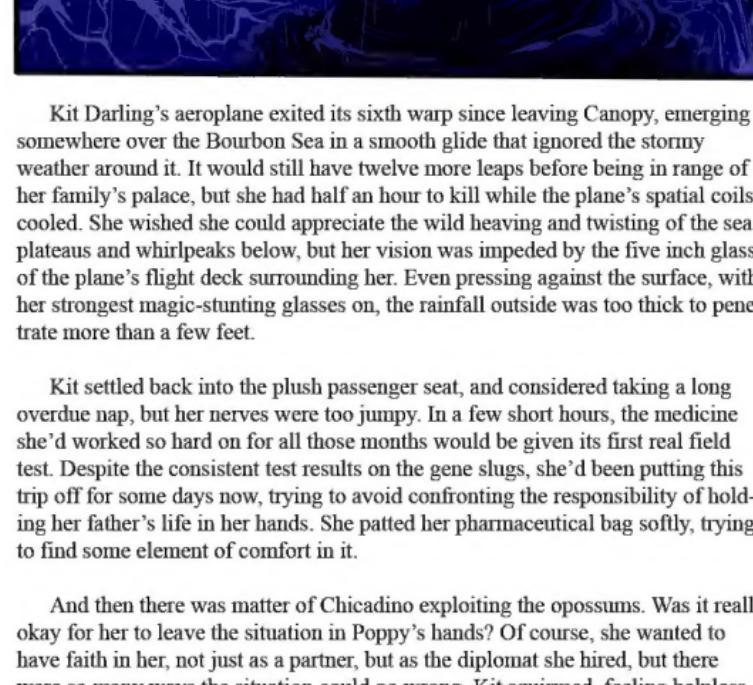
"Just one thing," said Poppy, "the rest of the outfit is free game, but it's really important that you just keep the neckerchief as is. I want it cleaned and nothing else."

"Are you sure?" Shiba asked. "We have some very lovely double gauze fabrics we could make a replacement with."

"No, no. It belonged—" Poppy choked. "It just has a lot of sentimental value for me."

"Oh, so it's one of those tragic mementos." Betty rolled her eyes. "Sure, I'll clean it. But you know, and maybe this is weird advice coming from a seamstress, but fabric is ultimately just fabric. You won't be able to move forward if you keep trying to literally wear your past on your sleeve."

"Okay. Thanks for the weird advice," Poppy said, and then she stared directly at Betty until she left the room in discomfort.



Kit Darling's aeroplane exited its sixth warp since leaving Canopy, emerging somewhere over the Bourbon Sea in a smooth glide that ignored the stormy weather around it. It would still have twelve more leaps before being in range of her family's palace, but she had half an hour to kill while the plane's spatial coils cooled. She wished she could appreciate the wild heaving and twisting of the sea plateaus and whirlpeaks below, but her vision was impeded by the five inch glass of the plane's flight deck surrounding her. Even pressing against the surface, with her strongest magic-stunting glasses on, the rainfall outside was too thick to penetrate more than a few feet.

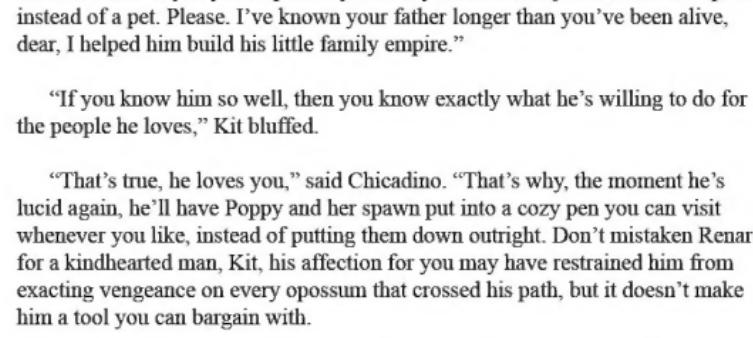
Kit settled back into the plush passenger seat, and considered taking a long overdue nap, but her nerves were too jumpy. In a few short hours, the medicine she'd worked so hard on for all those months would be given its first real field test. Despite the consistent test results on the gene slugs, she'd been putting this trip off for some days now, trying to avoid confronting the responsibility of holding her father's life in her hands. She patted her pharmaceutical bag softly, trying to find some element of comfort in it.

And then there was matter of Chicadino exploiting the opossums. Was it really okay for her to leave the situation in Poppy's hands? Of course, she wanted to have faith in her, not just as a partner, but as the diplomat she hired, but there were so many ways the situation could go wrong. Kit squirmed, feeling helpless. Without thinking, she pulled up the contact list in her spell phone and stopped at Arthur's number. There was still time before the next warp was possible, she could leave a short message asking him to call her in the morning. Maybe this was some big misunderstanding that could be resolved peacefully. Kit tapped the call icon and the phone rang only once before connecting.

"Hello, Kit," said Chicadino's voice on the other end, without missing a beat. Kit locked up, stunned. She was expecting a secretary, or an automatic voicemail, but here was Arthur taking his own calls at two in the morning without any fore-warning. "Awfully late for a chat, isn't it?"

"Er, my apologies, I should've waited to call you. But I've had some pressing concerns about some of your activities."

"Of course you have. That's why you were planning on confessing your dealings." There was no urgency in his voice as he accused her. "Or were you still thinking of having me killed?"



"Arthur, I want to give you a chance, rather, an ultimatum," Kit dodged. She couldn't afford to sound intimidated after what she'd said to Poppy. "I know you've been exploiting opossums, and I have reason to believe you're currently holding a man against his will. My demands are twofold. Release your captive unharmed, and abandon any attempt to reclaim your illegal shipments, and I will not further impede you."

"I refuse." The answer was without any hesitation. "I have no captive to release, nor do I believe you're in a position to threaten me. Destroy your own reputation if you like. You hold evidence linking yourself to a crime, and nothing more."

"Don't give me that, Chicadino. One word to my family about this deal and they'll—"

"They'll do what," said Chicadino, "thank me for providing you with resources needed to find Renard's cure? Compensate me for the money I spent salvaging your very public failings in running your sister's kingdom? Perhaps you deluded yourself into believing they'd welcome the news of your relationship with open arms as well. Maybe you hoped they'd treat your so-called *fiancée* like an equal instead of a pet. Please. I've known your father longer than you've been alive, dear, I helped him build his little family empire."

"If you know him so well, then you know exactly what he's willing to do for the people he loves," Kit bluffed.

"That's true, he loves you," said Chicadino. "That's why, the moment he's lucid again, he'll have Poppy and her spawn put into a cozy pen you can visit whenever you like, instead of putting them down outright. Don't mistaken Renard for a kindhearted man, Kit, his affection for you may have restrained him from exacting vengeance on every opossum that crossed his path, but it doesn't make him a tool you can bargain with."

"Oh, and one more thing. The dogma of Crodilus Panzer's revolutionaries have been riling up the neighbors, and they're *desperate* for any weak link in the Empire's outer territories to break through. You know, I believe our sea dragon's been looking a little sickly lately." Chicadino chuckled softly. "It'd be just awful to lose its protective Dragon Bell at a time like this."

"I see." Kit swallowed hard. "Well, I gave you a chance, Arthur."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind when your girlfriend comes poking her nose around my doorstep." And then the line went silent, leaving Kit alone to watch the plane's cooldown timer once again. There were still fifteen minutes left.

Poppy slid the ticket for her new clothes into her breast pocket and took a slight detour over to the *Shiboutique*'s unmanned front desk. Her spell phone battery died while she had been running around the city a few hours before, but one of Shiba's Boys had been polite enough to offer the use of a charging marble while she was upstairs discussing business. Her bulky block of a phone was now softly chirping from the tabletop, denoting it was fully recharged.



Poppy wasn't too surprised to see Hallia had left dozens of new messages while she was unavailable, they had been keeping in constant correspondence after her first text, and she was proving to be a surprisingly valuable asset. Since that afternoon, Hallia had warned her of Chicadino's intentions, let her know of Friedrich's capture, and given her advice on how to keep Lily safe until things blew over.

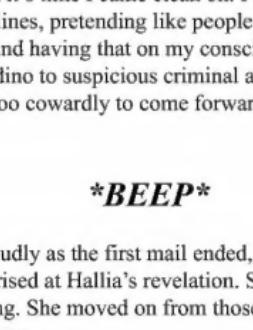
Poppy scrolled through the messages left after her phone died, and the texts became less relevant and more like those of a bored roommate, detailing updates on her current activities and growing less concerned with spelling errors. At that point, it seemed Hallia was just sending messages to assure that nothing bad had happened on her end, which Poppy couldn't help but appreciate.

As she went to reply to the last text in her box, she hesitated, soaking in the words on screen.

Got home, safe to talk on my end; imprtnt info, will leave voicemails if you can't answer. -HH

Only then did it occur to Poppy that she hadn't thought to tell Hallia about *Little Birdy*, and a pit began forming in her guts. She prayed that Hallia would think to avoid saying anything too incriminating out loud as she played the first of several voicemails.

"Hey, it's me, I have some important stuff to tell you if you're thinking of going up against Chicadino."



OH COME ON, Poppy thought.

"I don't know if you're still getting this," Hallia's voicemail continued, "but there's some stuff I think it's time I came clean on. For a long time, I've been content to sit on the sidelines, pretending like people haven't been getting hurt, but I'm not sure I can stand having that on my conscience anymore. I have evidence linking Mr. Chicadino to suspicious criminal activities for some years now, evidence that I've been too cowardly to come forward with because, I... used to work for him."

BEEP

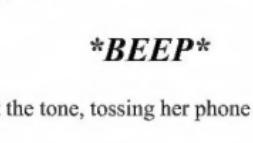
The phone chirped loudly as the first mail ended, and Poppy wondered if she was supposed to be surprised at Hallia's revelation. She was pretty sure it was on her résumé and everything. She moved on from those thoughts and clicked through to the next message.

"So, back then I was known as Milo Canny, a member of Chicadino's accounting team. For a little while, I was one of the guys who would partner up with Valente to make sure payments were all in order. Yeah, I know, you're probably thinking I got in too deep and had to change my name for protection, but uh, that was actually an unrelated thing. A little while before I lost that job, I had realized I was kind of unsatisfied with my identity, er, specifically, I wanted to be seen as a woman."



Poppy wasn't sure she really needed to know about this part.

"You know, it's actually kind of a funny story how I figured it out. You mammals tend to have a lot of trouble telling us birds apart, and there was this waitress at a diner Valente and I used to get lunch at who would always call me 'Miss,' on account of my voice and my cute face and all. I think she thought Valente and I were dating or something, ha ha!" There was a long pause, and Poppy heard shifting around and the sound of liquid pouring. "...Well, heh hehhh, I guess Chipper and I were kinda sorta engaging in a workplace inappropriate relationship for a little while."



THIS WOMAN IS DRUNK

"He had this whole '*purity of a man's spirit*' thing going on, though. No girls allowed in Valente's treehouse, if you know what I mean. So, uh, he didn't take it very well when I told him I was getting my name changed. He told me I was *compromised* and that he wasn't sure he wanted to be seen near me anymore. Which is pretty big talk for a guy who likes to-"

BEEP

Poppy panicked at the tone, tossing her phone forty yards straight up.

"Uh, sorry about that," Hallia's next voicemail began, as Poppy now firmly gripped her phone. "I got kind of sidetracked onto some personal stuff for a bit there. Let me get back to my point"



Wait, no! Go back to that other part, I'm invested now!

"When I was working for Chicadino, I noticed some weird inconsistencies with the budget for Chicadino's estate during my work. My boss asked me to dispose of some 'outdated' papers suggesting we spent far more on the building's material and construction costs than was reflected on our legal records. What's more, I quickly noticed there was an abnormal amount of empty space on my mental map, all localized within the center of the structure's five floors. I walked through those hallways hundreds of times and never saw any kind of doors or windows leading into those areas, nor was there any sort of central courtyard visible from above."

"I mean, really think about it, the whole thing is basically balanced on a set of anchor points attached to the Ovis tree by these big metal cables. It's way too strange for there to be completely unused real estate right above the most secure point on the platform. After all, it was designed by the late, great Roger Istzor, who was the best of the best when it came to these sorts of 'nest' estates. That man could get a brick to balance on a pinhead, so I find it hard to believe he would make such a strange design decision unless there was some hidden reason. What's more, I couldn't even ask him about it, since he died in a freak accident during construction." There was a short pause. "IF it was an accident, that is."

BEEP

Poppy's eyes rolled as she clicked through to the next message. She could practically see the pegboard on Hallia's room covered in notes for a conspiracy theory, not that she didn't think this train of thought was right on the money.

"But then, I considered the inconsistent construction records. The material budget required to fill a space that size would have easily accounted for the discrepancies. But why all the secrecy? Why keep it off the blueprints and records? What kind of facility was he hiding that needed so much space and support? Why go so far as to murder the architect who created it? I mean, not... that I'm saying that's necessarily what happened, but- It's all extremely suspect, is all."

Poppy thought back to what Harley's letter had said, the large room full of people gathering information and secret prison cells. Things were beginning to fit together. A grim thought passed through her mind as she considered that someone in the Little Birdy room had probably transcribed those very words.

"The truth is, I spent a lot of time convincing myself it was all just coincidences. I grew up on the streets, you know? Seeing a successful songbird like Chicadino? The idea of getting to work for him? It meant a lot to me growing up, I so dearly wanted to believe he was a good person. But... I've been deluding myself, and part of me knew it. That's why I never destroyed those documents. That's why I hid them all these years. Maybe they don't directly link him to murder or trafficking, but I mean, you could at least start by nailing him with fraud, right?"

"Annnnyway, I've been rambling for a while, I should wrap this up. Sounds like Miss Quibble's arguing with some idiots downstairs, I'm probably gonna go see what that's about. Hey, call me back as soon as you get these, I'll keep my phone close by, so if I don't answer, I probably got whacked!" A sharp chill ran up Poppy's spine.

BEEP

"Uh, that last bit was a joke, obviously. Maybe not the best time, sorry."

BEEP

Poppy immediately dialed Hallia's number and held her breath listening to the ringing on the other end.

"Hi, you've reached Hallia's phone, sor-"

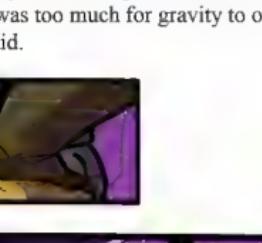
Poppy hung up and dialed again.

"Hi, you've reached Halli-

"Hi, you've reached-

"Hi, y-

"Hi-"

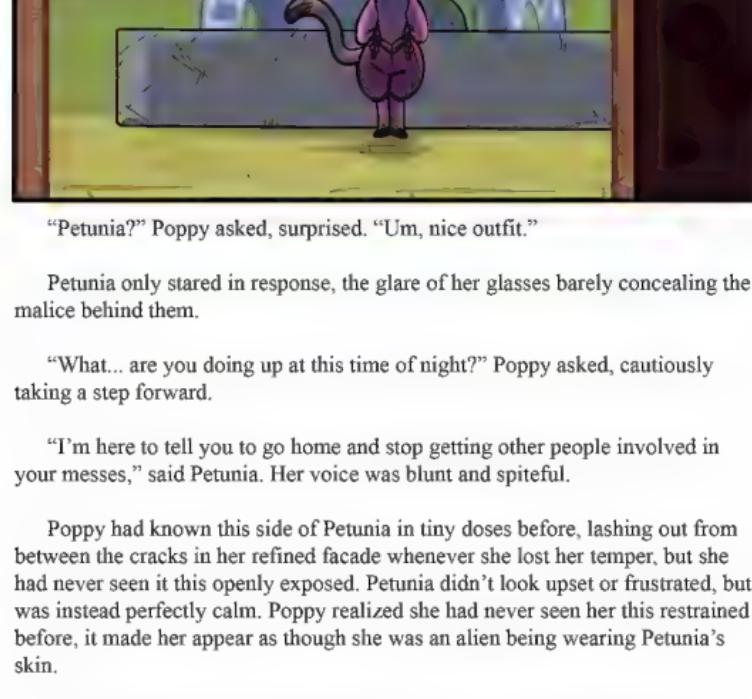


But her joints sure were going to hurt a lot in about ten seconds.



Poppy gripped the handle to Eggton's gate, nostalgia washing over her, and pulled, gently.

"Oh... Poppy," said a familiar voice waiting for her. "I was really, honestly hoping it wasn't true."



"Petunia?" Poppy asked, surprised. "Um, nice outfit."

Petunia only stared in response, the glare of her glasses barely concealing the malice behind them.

"What... are you doing up at this time of night?" Poppy asked, cautiously taking a step forward.

"I'm here to tell you to go home and stop getting other people involved in your messes," said Petunia. Her voice was blunt and spiteful.

Poppy had known this side of Petunia in tiny doses before, lashing out from between the cracks in her refined facade whenever she lost her temper, but she had never seen it this openly exposed. Petunia didn't look upset or frustrated, but was instead perfectly calm. Poppy realized she had never seen her this restrained before, it made her appear as though she was an alien being wearing Petunia's skin.

"I don't know what you—" Poppy started, but she quickly regained her focus. "Look, I don't have time for this, Hallia is—"

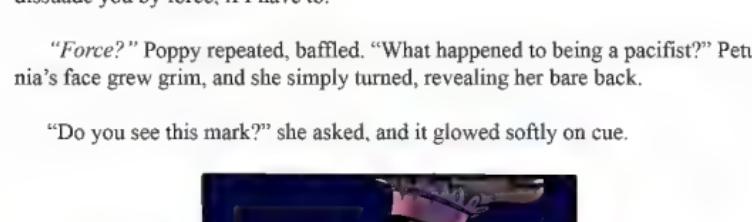
"Hallia is fine," Petunia interrupted. "Well, I wish '*fine*' was the proper word. She is currently under house arrest, and will be for the foreseeable future."

"Under hou- What for?" Poppy asked, as if she didn't already know.

"She's under suspicion of collaborating with a conspiracy against the State." Petunia sighed and furrowed her brow, as though bracing herself. "A conspiracy being organized by Poppy Odeletta Possum."

"Petunia, you had me going." Poppy laughed. "Don't tell me you actually bought that bulsha, you can't believe I'm conspiring agains—"

"Are you not attempting to take down Arthur Chicadino? Is that not what this is all about?" Petunia countered without a moment's hesitation. Poppy was stunned. She heard the words, but she couldn't process what Petunia was saying.



"No... Petunia, you're *working* for him...?" she finally mustered, crestfallen. Petunia said nothing, which spoke volumes. "I don't understand. How can you be okay with all of this?"

"*Okay?*" Petunia snapped. "You think I have the **luxury** of being '*okay*' with the things happening around me? You think I like being woken up at four in the morning and being told that my friends have become enemies of the state? That our town's assets will be seized if I don't cooperate?"

"What?! They can't do that!"

"Oh, yes they can," said Petunia. "Eggton belongs to Chicadino. The deed was signed away months ago."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because we don't need your help," said Petunia, her voice dripping with venom. "Ever since you showed up, things have gotten more and more complicated, so just... let us handle our own problems this time."

"But—"

"This is a charm that has been permanently tattooed into my skin. If I ever harm another person, no matter how slightly, the blows I land on them will be magically backlashed onto me. *That* is the nature of my vow. Pacifism isn't something I believe, it's a curse I willingly had inflicted upon myself."

"I don't understand," Poppy said. "Why do that if you don't really believe it?"

"That's not important," she deflected. "What is important... Is that it doesn't work on you. *And I will not hesitate to exploit that if you force my hand.*"

"This is ridiculous, Petunia," Poppy pleaded. "You can't expect things will get better for you just because you take his orders this time."

"No, perhaps not," said Petunia. "But I know things will become much worse if I resist. You know they could just take Hallie in outright and I wouldn't be able to stop them? It took me half an hour to get Chicadino to even consider compromising. But he did, and as long as you stay away from Eggton until this matter is resolved, she won't be charged and everyone here gets to keep their homes without incident."

"They aren't going to '*resolve*' anything," said Poppy, shaking her head, "they're trying to find and destroy the only evidence we've got!"

"So what?" Petunia spat, spinning back around on her heels. "You think evidence means anything at this point? He's Prime Minister, Poppy, and even if he wasn't, he commands a small army of loyal men. Some shady documents weren't ever going to faze him."

"Then why would he need to pit you against me at all?" Poppy pointed out, and Petunia's breathing faltered, so slightly that she wouldn't have noticed if she wasn't looking for it. "If he's resorting to threatening your entire town, he has to be scared of something we've got. If not the evidence, than the idea that we'll join forces and fight against him."

Petunia did not respond, simply standing her ground like a statue.

"So that's it then?" Poppy asked. "You're just going to give up without even trying, and then pretend you had no other options?"

"Poppy, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to risk my father's- risk Eggton's safety for your little crusade, especially if you're actually stupid enough to suggest physically overpowering his operation." Petunia paused, scanning up and down Poppy's form. "Even with all my training, you couldn't stand a chance against me, let alone everyone he can put between you and him."

"You think so?" said Poppy, spreading her legs into a grounded stance. "Well then, you beat me? I'll leave, no fuss. But if I prove you wrong and win, I don't think Chicadino's gonna give you the option of running away anymore."

"Very well," Petunia said. Her voice was barely above a whisper now.



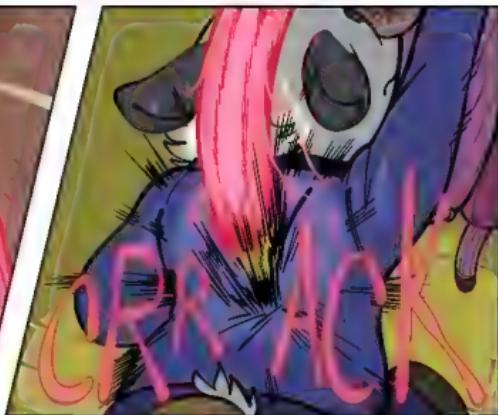
"Allow me to teach you the final lesson my mother imparted to me."

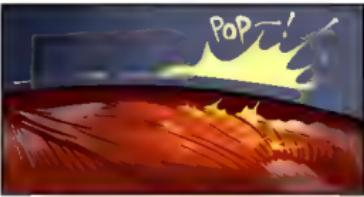


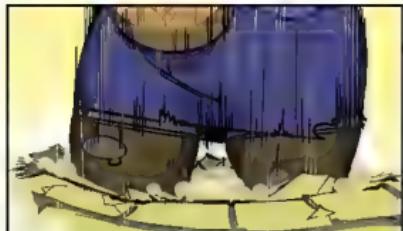
“Humility.”



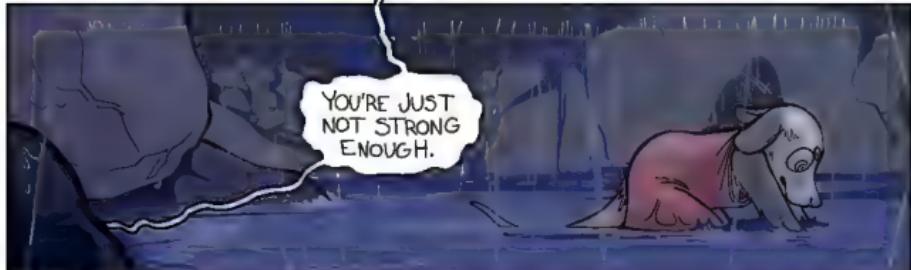










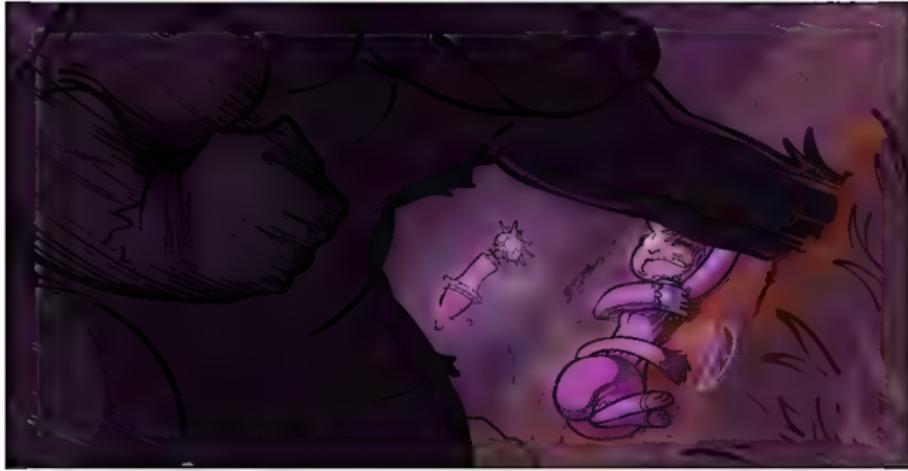




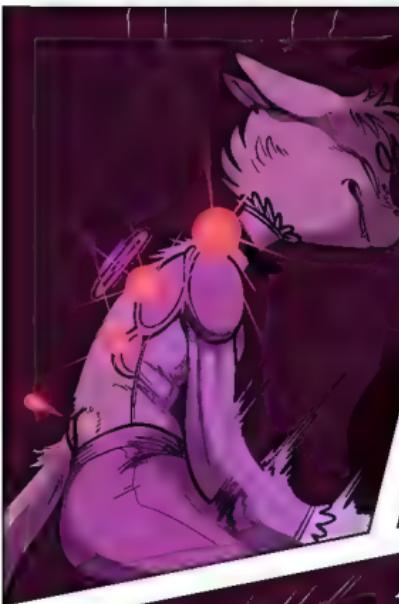














CcLAANNNGG





Petunia's form crumpled and skidded across the side of the hill, the force of the charm's backlash having sent her spiralling cleanly through the air like an arrow. Her momentum finally eroded as her shoulder pushed through dirt and grass and acted as a fulcrum upon which the rest of her body rested, as her legs remained suspended for a full second before dropping to the ground with a satisfying *thump*.

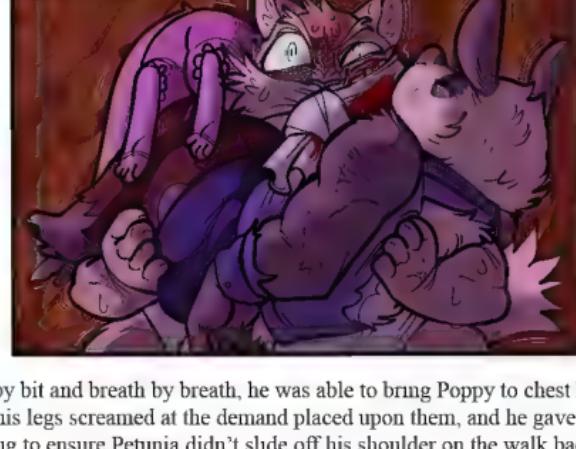


Mr. Quibble trudged over to his daughter, discarding his ruined glasses and pulling away his sleeve to create a makeshift bandage. Blood from the tears in his cheek pooled in his gums, creating a sick sputtering noise as he breathed, and it took all of his willpower to resist licking at his wounds and tearing them wider. Despite the scalding pain and blood loss, he felt grateful to get off so easy as he considered the ghastly alternative. Petunia would have swatted away his head as effortlessly as an empty can from a counter if his spear hadn't buffered her blow, a death that would have been infinitely preferable to her life were such a thing to pass.

Petunia remained motionless, out cold from emotional shock more than any physical trauma. Despite her wild tumbles, Alvus knew there was very little risk of her having taken any major injuries, as she had spent years reinforcing her body's flexibility and durability during her training. Alvus gingerly slid his hands under her, and hoisted her up and over himself with ease, handling her entire weight as effortlessly as one would a jacket slung over their shoulder.



Poppy, on the other hand, was much, much heavier than she looked, and she looked like the reason trampolines came with weight limits. Alvus' feet dug deep into the softened dirt trying to hoist her up, and he clenched his teeth hard, flaring the pain from his cheek around the back of his skull and down his neck. It took several false starts and more than one loud complaint about the state of his back before Alvus was able to lift her in earnest, old strength that had gone long disused bubbling up once more.



Bit by bit and breath by breath, he was able to bring Poppy to chest height, although his legs screamed at the demand placed upon them, and he gave a quick half shrug to ensure Petunia didn't slide off his shoulder on the walk back to Eggton. This was easily the most taxing thing he'd had to do all night, moreso than his evening workout routine, attending to some very rude guests, digging a pair of holes, filling a pair of holes, and the eight-minute mile he just ran to get his face slapped halfway off.

The immense strain stretching all across Alvus' body as he moved caused a burst of nostalgia to well up from deep within as a familiar ache of twenty-seven years past enveloped him.



"C-come on, Al! Give it up ...! You've .. gotten.. soft!"



An eruption of cheers and jeers rang out as the jaguar opponent rubbed his hand. A few of the rowdier nobles had set up a corner of the dining hall for "friendly competition," and for the first time that evening, Alvus had felt somewhat in his element.

"Rrgh, cocky tomcat!" snarled the nobleman, planting his elbow once more. "Best two of three!"

"Oh, come now, Moroch, don't be such a poor sport!" Alvus taunted. "Why, were this a proper duel, you'd be dead where you stand!" He crossed his throat with a cheeky grin.



"I'm afraid there shall be no time for further contests." A voice shot through the crowd, soft but imposing, and the guests parted with looks full of reverence and fear. There was not a soul among them who wasn't familiar with its owner, newly ascended Matriarch of the Rani family and one of the women known as *the Seven D*vas*.



"Rose!?" Moroch mewed, and coughing, he instantly shifted toward a more cordial tone. "Er- Lady Rani, it's so good to see you. I was just catching up with Alvus here. Might I say? You've done quite a job civilizing him. I almost didn't recognize *the savage brute who stole my father's heirloom pocket watch*," he said, through a gritted smile. Alvus, meanwhile, was slapping at his thighs and beaming like a contented child.

"I would just like to collect my husband, if you would not mind." Rose's words and expression remained as gentle and delicate as the small kitten in her arms, but she nevertheless created an unnerving presence that set every hair in the area standing on end. Simply being near her was a deep violation, like an invisible hand reaching up one's spine and scooping its fingers through their brain.

"Oh, of course, of course, please do!" said Moroch, waving his paws anxiously. Alvus marched over to his wife and shot one last smug glare over his shoulder, earning a volley of quiet contempt from several of his rivals in return.

After ducking out into a long side hallway, Rose broke the silence between them.

"He despises you, you know," she said, still looking forward. "And not just because of that ugly watch. He thinks you 'stole' me away or some such nonsense." Alvus rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, but you hardly need to be a mind reader to see that."

"I think you could, perhaps, stand to egg them on just a bit less, Alvy. It's-ngh—" She stopped, pressing her free hand to her head, her brow wrinkling with discomfort.

"...Maybe we really should have stayed home," Alvus said, gently rubbing Rose's shoulder. "This sort of crowd must be a huge strain on you."

"It's fine, dear. I just... need to sit down somewhere with less noise. Besides, people would get to talking if I didn't attend. As nobility, we have to set an example and show some good faith if we hope to attain any peace."

Good faith, my tail, Alvus thought, sneering. *This whole shindig is just the canines taking their big victory lap while we clean up the mess they left us.*

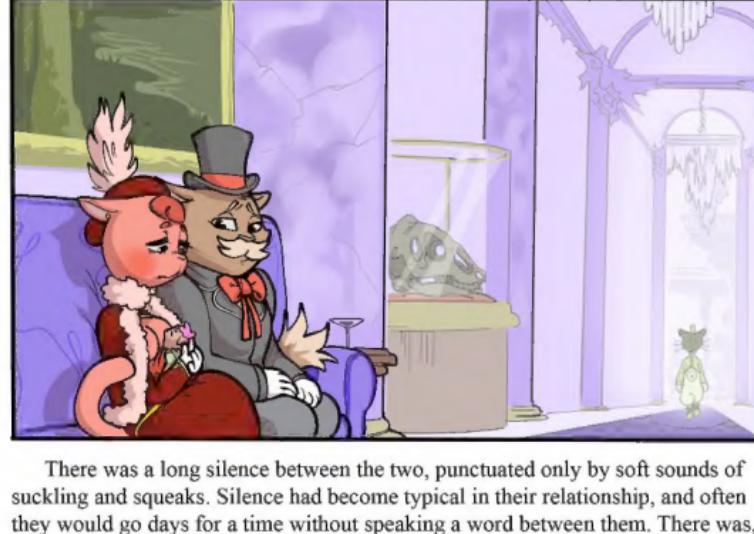
"As that may be, we'll just have to bear it." Rose held the stirring babe closer to her breast. "We have children to think of now. I won't let them grow up in the world we had to, not if I can avoid it."

"Er, well, you know—" Alvus changed the subject, trying to clear his head. "-with all of the animosity in the air, it feels like half of the cats here are snobs I hospitalized way back when, and the other half are all of your jilted suitors."

"Well, that's not true, Alvy," Rose chided. "A fifth of the men here *must* be both, at least." Alvus let out a long, hearty laugh. His wife wasn't normally one to tell jokes, but every once in a while, she surprised him. His joy was short-lived, however, and he found himself quickly biting his lip as their baby let out a piercing yowl, squirming feverishly in Rose's arms. "Mmn, Petunia must be hungry again," she said, adjusting the kitten up onto her shoulder.

"Oh! Well, what fortunate timing!" exclaimed Alvus, patting an open couch close by. "Here! A fine, lovely seat made for two fine, lovely ladies!"

"Hmph. You really don't think at all before you speak, do you?" huffed Rose, embarrassed. "Five years and you still know how to sneak that sort of sweet talk under my Radar."



There was a long silence between the two, punctuated only by soft sounds of suckling and squeaks. Silence had become typical in their relationship, and often they would go days for a time without speaking a word between them. There was, of course, nothing unusual about spouses that did not talk to one another in a society where marriage by familial obligation was a norm, but Alvus held no status in that society, and so their silence masked the deep affinity between them. Rose could understand everyone around her perfectly, and Alvus had a unique understanding of Rose, in that he knew it was pointless to try and understand her. He wholeheartedly trusted that she would simply speak freely if there was something she felt needed saying, which she did.

"I'm worried about Petunia," Rose finally whispered. "Her brothers and sisters attached to the nurses so quickly, but her... She's so stubborn. Anyone but me and she throws such an awful tantrum."

"Come, come," Alvus cooed, adjusting his hat. "Nothing strange about a babe wanting their mother, is there?" Admittedly, he didn't really understand the point of having their children feed from the milk of other women to begin with, but he supposed it wasn't really his call to make, and simply chalked it up to another of nobility's many indulgent habits.

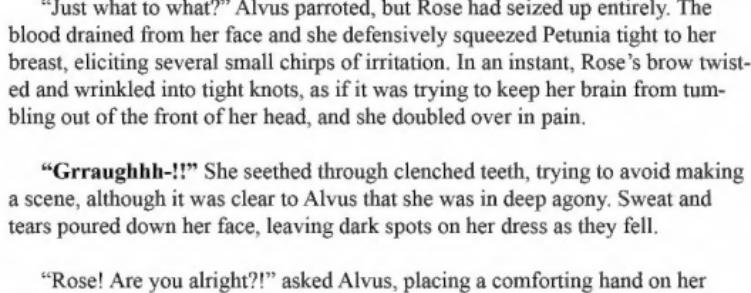
"Oh, you know I'd be there for all of them if my schedule allowed for it, nobility or not." Rose shot him a knowing smile, but it quickly faded as she turned back to the suckling kitten. "It's more than that, though. There's an unruliness within her that the other children lack, something deep and ingrained. I fear she may end up as another... *problem child* of the Rani family if discipline isn't taken."

"Rose, she's a month old, for goodness' sake," Alvus laughed, stifling a twinge of discomfort. "I really shouldn't have to ask you not to compare her to actual sociopaths."

"I'd rather be safe than sorry, Alvy. If there's even the slightest chance she could turn out like my brothers, we need to stomp out those tendencies early. I can't make the same mistakes my parents did."

"I'll tell you what, dear," said Alvus, a small smile already forming on Rose's lips in anticipation of the teasing to come. "How about we just go ahead and spend the first few years treating her like a totally normal child, and then, if we, say, catch her systematically pulling the legs off of bugs, *then we can start getting worried.*"

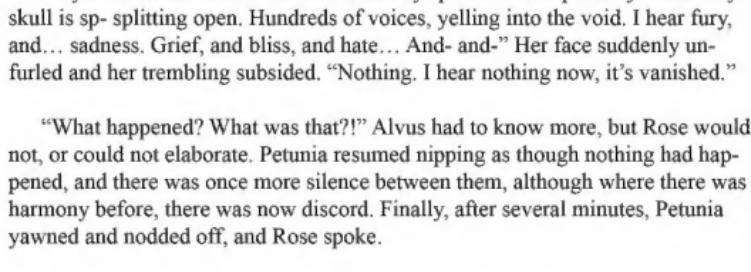
"Oh Alvus, you always know just what to..."



"Just what to what?" Alvus parroted, but Rose had seized up entirely. The blood drained from her face and she defensively squeezed Petunia tight to her breast, eliciting several small chirps of irritation. In an instant, Rose's brow twisted and wrinkled into tight knots, as if it was trying to keep her brain from tumbling out of the front of her head, and she doubled over in pain.

"**Grrraughhh-!!**" She seethed through clenched teeth, trying to avoid making a scene, although it was clear to Alvus that she was in deep agony. Sweat and tears poured down her face, leaving dark spots on her dress as they fell.

"Rose! Are you alright?!" asked Alvus, placing a comforting hand on her back.



"My head- Feels like..." She could barely speak. "It's impossibly dense. My skull is sp- splitting open. Hundreds of voices, yelling into the void. I hear fury, and... sadness. Grief, and bliss, and hate... And- and-" Her face suddenly unfurled and her trembling subsided. "Nothing. I hear nothing now, it's vanished."

"What happened? What was that?!" Alvus had to know more, but Rose would not, or could not elaborate. Petunia resumed nipping as though nothing had happened, and there was once more silence between them, although where there was harmony before, there was now discord. Finally, after several minutes, Petunia yawned and nodded off, and Rose spoke.

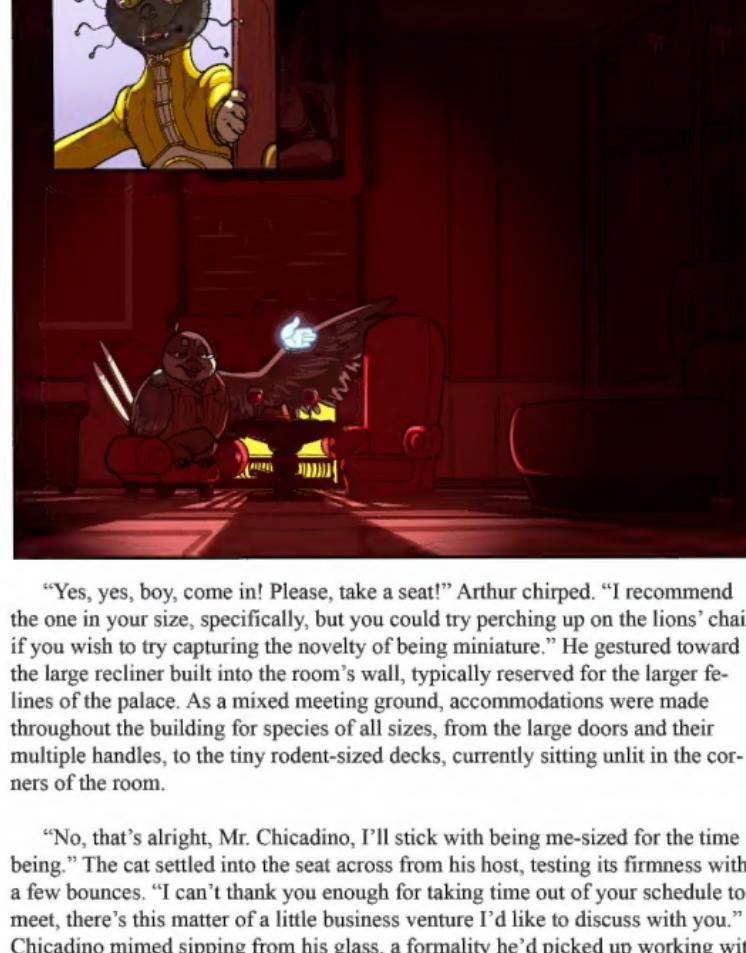
"We're leaving, Alvus," she said, with an uncharacteristically desperate tone to her voice. She did not look at him. Her eyes focused downwards, deep into the grain of the carpet, and full of a terror he had never known her to possess.

"Wait, already? What happened to 'showing good faith?' Shouldn't we at least stick around until they sign the-"

"**We're leaving,**" she repeated, rebuttoning the flap on her dress, and Alvus knew she would not repeat herself a third time.

Gripping the door's lower knob and taking a brief moment to center his breathing, a cat in immaculate golden garb peeked his head into the sitting room he'd been directed to some minutes earlier and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Chicadino, sir?" he inquired.



"Yes, yes, boy, come in! Please, take a seat!" Arthur chirped. "I recommend the one in your size, specifically, but you could try perching up on the lions' chair, if you wish to try capturing the novelty of being miniature." He gestured toward the large recliner built into the room's wall, typically reserved for the larger felines of the palace. As a mixed meeting ground, accommodations were made throughout the building for species of all sizes, from the large doors and their multiple handles, to the tiny rodent-sized decks, currently sitting unlit in the corners of the room.

"No, that's alright, Mr. Chicadino, I'll stick with being me-sized for the time being." The cat settled into the seat across from his host, testing its firmness with a few bounces. "I can't thank you enough for taking time out of your schedule to meet, there's this matter of a little business venture I'd like to discuss with you." Chicadino mimed sipping from his glass, a formality he'd picked up working with mammals, as he had no lips.

"Ah, yes. You were hoping to use me and my connections as a stepping stone toward becoming a member of King Noble's inner circle, was it?" he asked.

"Er, n-no," the cat tittered, picking up his own glass. "I'm here to talk about the exclusive shipping rights for my goods? Through your company? Perhaps you're confusing me with someone else, I'm Hav-"

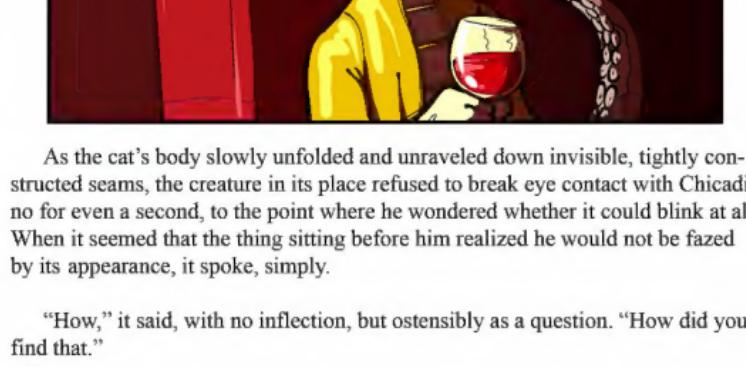
"I know exactly who you are." The silence hung in the room for a moment as Chicadino stated a fact, not an assertion.

"Havel Follwhisker, born in '34 on Wintember 14th to Leopold and Gracie Follwhisker. Graduated from NYA with degrees in alchemy and business and founded a metalworking company specializing in gold and other precious metals after inheriting a small fortune. Appeared in *Purrsuit's 20 Up-And-Coming Business Owners* last year and as of about nine hours ago, strangled to death, buried approximately twenty kilometers outside of Feliad city limits, and replaced by a monster wearing his name."

The cat sitting across from Chicadino choked on his wine as if realizing it was poisoned.

"Pa's claws, Chicadino, I'd heard you were funny, but I'm not so sure I share your sense of humor," he gasped, taking another quick sip of wine to stifle his coughs. "-Almost thought you were serious for a second there."

"Yes, yes, you've done quite a lot of work mimicking his appearance, his gait, and his way of speaking, as you've **always** done," Chicadino said, as though dismissing the argument of a child. "You've even replicated his little golden fang."



"Although personally, I'd say the real thing was much gaudier."



As the cat's body slowly unfolded and unraveled down invisible, tightly constructed seams, the creature in its place refused to break eye contact with Chicadino for even a second, to the point where he wondered whether it could blink at all. When it seemed that the thing sitting before him realized he would not be fazed by its appearance, it spoke, simply.

"How," it said, with no inflection, but ostensibly as a question. "How did you find that."

"As I said: I know **exactly** who you are."

"*Poda. Maman draconica. Hand of the Specter of Fate,*" Chicadino listed off names and titles and the creature before him twitched at the sound of each. "I also know that the real reason you agreed to meet with me was so that you could exploit this opportunity to eat my memories, murder me, and then take control of my position as one of Noble's dearest friends."

"And why, if you're so familiar with me, would you willingly throw yourself into my path?" asked Poda, settling into her underlying persona. "There are much more satisfying means of suicide to pursue, if you so desired."

"Let us say..." Chicadino made a show of mulling it over in his head for a moment. "-that I am a fan of yours. Or perhaps, it may be more accurate to say it's the other way around."

"You see," Chicadino began. "History long suppressed tells us of the *Specters of Fate*: beings blessed by the Lucky Stars with an insatiable hunger for information and the means to grasp it, who tear through the veils of ignorance to guide Flora towards the single, inevitable truth at the end of all paths." He closed his eyes in a moment of reverence. "When I first learned of the Specter, I had been living a life devoid of meaning, and the idea of following in the footsteps of such a figure filled me with a sense of purpose. But the more I searched for them, the more it seemed that Flora only grew darker and darker with ignorance each day. Indeed, it seemed there was no Specter to be found at all."

Chicadino lowered his head in grim resignation, and let out a deep sigh that filled the room.

"But then it hit me!" he perked up. "All of those traits I was looking for applied to me! All those years spent looking for an answer that was right in front of me! *I was the Specter of Fate you've been waiting for this entire time, Poda!*" Arthur gave her a genial smile, but his assertion was met only with quiet disgust and disappointment.

"So," she spat. "You read yourself a few forbidden texts? And now you think you're a *Big Special Boy*." Poda snapped her beak as she punctuated each word. "You? The Specter of Fate? Don't make me laugh, little bird. I've seen dozens of gullible brats like you try to take the reins of the world, and each of them found themselves making rather sudden contributions to my impalpable godmass."

Chicadino allowed the threat to hang in the air, long enough for the phrase *impalpable godmass* to deflate into a contender for the most embarrassing thing that had ever been said in that room.

"I... ate them. Is... what I am saying."

"Oh no, I understood the implication."

There was further uncomfortable silence.

"A wager, then!" he chirped in singsong. "I'll bet that I can surprise you with just a single word, and if you're not sufficiently convinced of my nature, then you can eat me and take my place."

"I can do that regardless of how you choose to frame it," she snipped, her face already twisting into a crude facsimile of his own. "But very well, let us play. I'll give you ten seconds to wow me."

"Ten."

Her coloration was changing before his eyes.

"Nine. Eight. Seven."

Poda slid off the armchair, her form expanding without limit.

"Six. Five. Four."

She was now inches away, her arms coming in for the kill.

"Three."

"Two."



"Sinfriochatti."

Poda screamed and thrashed backward through the room, sending her armchair swiveling on one leg and toppling over. Her eyes rolled around in her skullless mantle like a pair of trackballs given a firm spin, as the brand on her forehead popped and fizzled. Her entire body went slack and crumpled on the floor, and her eight arms, now unraveled and sprawled out, began to spasm in waves, each with a unique tempo. After several seconds of sound and fury, the brand went dark again, and her scorched skin immediately began to heal, sputtering with sparks of magic. Within no time at all, there was no sign of any physical scarring left over, but Poda's emotional state told a very different story, as her tentacles struggled to maintain a coherent shape no matter how many times she attempt to recoil them.

"That is... impossible," said Poda, drooping uselessly over the fallen armchair like a pile of wet noodles. "You shouldn't possibly know that trigger."

"You've a lot of nerve to be telling me what I should and shouldn't be able to do," Chicadino laughed. "Don't you know who I am?"

"It... It really *is* you..." Poda's eyes glimmered and she rolled across the floor, contracting her body at his feet as a sign of adoration. "My dearest...!"



Arthur gripped her extended arm and gave it a soft peck.

"Come, my darling Poda," he cooed, pulling a camera from a nearby bag. "I promised Ren and ol' Chunkcrown I would meet them shortly, so consider this your first order."

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"Alright gentlemen, get in close!" said Arthur's secretary, gently flapping a wing to grab the men's attention. King Noble momentarily thought it awfully strange that he hadn't seen her arrive with Arty, but Renard had a gut feeling that it was best just to let her be, and they both knew nothing in the world was as reliable as Renard Darling's gut.

"Now then, say 'trees'!"

Click-!